

UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH GRAMMAR AND USAGE

英語の文法と語法を理解する

Patrick Dougherty and Yoshinori Tomoshige

南雲堂



NAN'UN-DO

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Patrick Dougherty / Yoshinori Tomoshige

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INTRODUCTION

**“The greater part of the world’s troubles are due to questions
of grammar.” ~ Michel de Montaigne**

“Grammar,” for many, is a frightening word. It connotes perplexing rules that must be memorized to pass even more perplexing tests. This is unfortunate, as grammar itself is simply a search for clarity and order. Grammar builds a base upon which meaning can be constructed and communication successfully achieved. In the parlance of the United Kingdom and the United States, the first formal level of education was historically called the “grammar school.” It served as the foundation of education. The choice of words is poetic in a way, as grammar is the foundation of language. Perhaps the problem has been one of how the words and phrases have been presented to the reader. Discussion of grammar often revolves around opaque descriptions of usage with a frustratingly high incidence of obscure terminology. What *Understanding English Grammar and Usage* works to accomplish is ease of understanding. A number of complex grammar questions are addressed with clear, concise, and layperson friendly answers. The selection of questions was done with the ambition of addressing the most challenging grammatical concepts that haunt the student of the English language. Accessibility is the objective with each of the answers. This book is meant for the student and for the language aficionado.

Patrick Dougherty and Yoshinori Tomoshige

HOW TO USE THIS TEXTBOOK

Meant for any serious exploration of English grammar, this textbook was designed for both classroom use and self-study. Each unit involves an in-depth question, or questions, about complex English grammar. After the question section there is a response where each question receives a clear, definitive, answer. After the question-and-answer sections there are exercises where the student of grammar may then apply their new understanding to solve various word and sentence problems utilizing the information provided regarding the grammar under study. Through this process of question and answer and then application of understanding, the student of grammar will, step by step, improve their understanding of complex English grammar.

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QUESTION

In our English conversation class, our American teacher asked me what type of animal I would like to own as a pet. So, I said to him “I’d like to have dog.” Then he laughed out loud, but I didn’t know the reason for his laughter, so I asked him why he laughed, but he just smiled at me and wrote the following statements (a) and (b) and told me to guess the difference between them. But since there are no articles in Japanese, it is hard for me to tell (a) from (b). So, could you tell me the difference between them?

- (a) I’d like to have a dog.
(b) I’d like to have dog.

ANSWER

In the noun phrase “a dog,” “a” is an indefinite article. We use it when we refer to a noun that is not specific. I could say, “I like a good book,” this means that any good book would do and that I would be happy reading any book that I found that was good. If I said, “I like the book,” then I am referring to a specific book. For example, someone could ask me, “Do you like the new textbook that our professor wrote?” and, if I did, I would respond, “Yes, I like the book.”

With regard to example (a), “I’d like to have a dog,” you could use that when you were asked, for example, what type of animal you might like to own as a pet. You could have responded, “When it comes to pets, I like a dog.” Now, why did your English teacher laugh when you said “I’d like to have dog?” He laughed because it was the form that is often used when referring to the type of food, or dish, one likes to eat. For example, if someone asked “What is your favorite meal?” I could respond, “I like barbeque,” or “I like pasta.” When you responded, “I’d like to have dog,” it sounded like you were referring to what you liked to eat. I am sure that that is not what was meant.

In this connection, if we say “I’d like to have dogs,” it means although there are various kinds of dogs, I like any dogs. And, with regard to a sentence like “I love that dog,” we refer to a specific dog and the dog is known to both the speaker and hearer. And lastly, as for the sentences like “I love that dog,” we are talking about one specific dog among some dogs.

ANOTHER QUESTION

I understand that as you explain, an indefinite article is used to refer to non-specific nouns, but I think that an indefinite article may also be used to mention a specific noun.

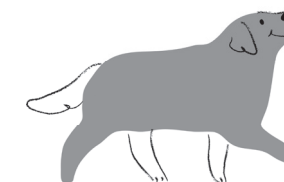
For example, if some person says, “I’d like to consult a lawyer,” he or she may have a specific lawyer in his or her mind, but it might be possible that he or she is referring to a non-specific lawyer, too. This sentence could be used to express that he or she would like to consult any lawyer as long as the person is any type of lawyer. This means the expression “a lawyer” can refer to both a specific noun and a non-specific one. Therefore, it seems that there are cases where an indefinite article is also used to refer to a specific noun. So, we need to consider sentences such as “I like a good book,” and “I’d like to consult a lawyer,” and distinguish the former type and the latter type properly. How would you explain the cases where these types of sentences actually occur?

ANOTHER ANSWER

Yes, you are correct that the speaker could be referring to a specific lawyer. However, we would only really know that via the context of the conversation. Let’s say two men are at a party. A woman who is a medical doctor walks up and talks with them. After she leaves, one of the men looks at the other and says, “I’d like to marry a doctor.” In that context the man might very well be referring to the woman doctor that just spoke to them. It would only be understood via the tone and facial expressions of the individual saying it, and would entirely be dependent on this bit of body language and the context for us to be sure what was meant. Language requires more than words to make sense. We need context and other clues to perceive meaning. That would be the only method that we would be able to employ in order to understand if a specific person or thing was meant.

Taking this discussion further, when it is an issue of determining whether a specific doctor or dog or cat or another entity is being referred to by the speaker, the entity must be indicated by the speaker or writer and is often done contextually. For example, if a child walked into a room and saw some chocolate bars on a table and exclaimed, “I want candy,” we would know from the context that the child wants the candy (chocolate bars) on the table. This kind of information is obtained from the context and from the circumstances of the scene.

So, if we use the indefinite article “a” or “an”, it will always refer to a non-specific noun unless the context and other factors play a part to hint to the listener or reader that a specific noun is being referred to in the conversation or statement. Language works within a structure of context and association. Basically, when we try to understand the meaning of some expression containing an article, we always have to consider the context in which the expression occurs. However, as a general rule, we can usually rely on the simple structure of “the” referring to a specific category and “a/an” referring to a general category.



Exercise 1

Put an appropriate article in the blank. If no article is necessary, leave the blank empty.

1. I have a lot of friends. Most of them are () company employees.
2. When I was () high school student, I belonged to the tennis club.
3. Jane says she would like to be () actress.
4. George is () lawyer. His parents were () lawyers, too.
5. Bye! Have () nice weekend.
6. What () coincidence! I wasn't expecting to see you here.
7. Is he () nice person?
8. I think he will be () good teacher.
9. Nature is () best physician.
10. Sally is () excellent dancer.
11. Would you like () cup of coffee?
12. They live in () big house in the middle of town.
13. () hotel where we stayed was very nice.
14. He seems to have () problem. I think I'll try to be of some help.
15. Room 17 is on () third floor.
16. Just when I got () home, it began to rain.
17. I hear Joe was in () prison for robbery for two years.
18. We must admit that it's hard to get () regular job these days.
19. Only () super rich could afford a mansion like that.
20. What time do you usually go to () work?
21. John loves to look at () stars in () sky.
22. () earth goes around () sun.
23. She doesn't watch () TV much, but listens to () radio a lot.
24. He's a vegetarian. He never eats () meat.
25. What time did you go to () bed last night?
26. I can play the tune without () sheet music.
27. After he told the joke, there was () burst of laughter.
28. I think you'd better go to () dentist.
29. Let's go to the station by () taxi.
30. John kissed her on () cheek.

Exercise 2

Choose the right one.

1. Why don't we go to (movies / the movies) tonight?
2. Have you had (dinner / the dinner) yet, George?
3. What would you like to have for (breakfast / the breakfast)?
4. It's difficult to imagine life without (Internet / the Internet) nowadays.
5. John had (big lunch / a big lunch) at noon.
6. I have always been good. I have never been in (trouble / the trouble).
7. Do you have a car, or will you use (public transportation / the public transportation)?
8. (Art / The art) is long, (life / the life) is short.
9. (Tea / The tea) I had after dinner was very good.
10. I would like to see (Professor Smith / the Professor Smith).

Exercise 3

Complete the sentences using the words given in the square brackets and then translate them into Japanese.

1. [we, yesterday, the, met, girl, name, that, of, what's]?

_____?

Japanese _____

2. [I, five, eight, a, a, work, day, and, days, week, hours].

_____.

Japanese _____

3. [John, the, still, is, with, in, flu, bed].

_____.

Japanese _____

4. [keeps, doctor, apple, day, a, an, the, away].

_____.

Japanese _____